

DHS Daily Digest

The DHS Daily Digest provides summaries of the Department's latest news coverage. The DHS Daily Digest is released via email and contains hypertext links to the listed documents.

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Positive: 4

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National News

Proactive:

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Local News

This Savannah man killed a 4-year-old with Down syndrome by punching her in the stomach- *The Island Packet and The Beaufort Gazette*

By Michael Olinger

A Savannah man will spend the rest of his life behind bars for a 2016 murder of a 4-year-old and assault of a 3-year-old.

In January of 2016, detectives with the Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Police Department arrested and charged then 23-year-old James Emmanuel Robinson in the murder of a child, according to a release from the SCMPD.

On Monday, Robinson was convicted for the killing of 4-year-old Lalia Hawthorne. Hawthorne, who had Down syndrome, was killed when Robinson punched her in the stomach, the Savannah Morning News reports.

He was also convicted for a similar attack on Hawthorne's 3-year-old sister Nakeita, the Morning News said. She survived the attack.

All in, he was convicted of felony murder, two counts of aggravated assault and three counts of cruelty to children in the first degree, WJCL reports.

Robinson was sentenced to life plus 80 years in prison, according to WSAV.

That breaks down to a life sentence for the aggravated assault and murder of Lalia Hawthorne and 20 years each on the remaining charges, to be served consecutively, WTGS reports.

Lalia Hawthorne died on Oct. 27, 2015 and a suspicious death investigation was initiated shortly thereafter, according to the SCMPD release.

Hawthorne attempted suicide following an interview with police on Oct. 29 of that year, the release said.

Before an autopsy was conducted revealing the true cause of her death, it was believed that Hawthorne had died from meningitis, according to WSAV.

Following Hawthorne's murder the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services removed her three surviving siblings, aged seven, five and three, from their residence, the release said.

When handing down his sentence, Chatham County Superior Court Judge James F. Bass Jr. expressed sympathies for the victims and called the crimes "unbelievably horrendous," the Savannah Morning News reports.

Phenix City dad struggled with child support system after leaving NFL — and he's not alone- *The Ledger-Enquirer*

By Alva James-Johnson

Video: <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/latest-news/article205271024.html>

When Orwin Smith was released from the Green Bay Packers in 2014, he wasn't sure how he would continue paying the child support required for his then-3-year-old son.

"I was stuck between still chasing my dream or getting a job," said the former Phenix City running back who played for Central High School and Georgia Institute of Technology before joining the NFL. "... You have a dream you want to chase that could turn out to be very rewarding, but in the midst of that you have something like the child welfare agency breathing down your back."

So Smith turned to the Division of Child Support Services Fatherhood Program, which helps dads struggling with their child support payments due to unemployment or under-employment in many cases. His situation was not as dire as others in the program, and he was able to make his payments. Still, he found the support he needed to secure a decent job and navigate the legal system.

Now Smith, the general manager at a finance company in Columbus, is an advocate for the Fatherhood Program, as well as other fathers who want to be good parents, but face challenges paying child support.

"Just from my experience, there are a lot of men who actually want to take care of their children," he said in a recent interview with the Ledger-Enquirer. "Unfortunately, the laws almost prevent them from being able to make their payments."

"... Mom loses a job, life goes on. Father loses a job, first thing comes to his mind is, 'I'm about to go to jail.' It shouldn't be like that."

Smith is not alone in his experience and observations. On Saturday, the Division of Child Support Services Fatherhood Program, in partnership with the Georgia State Organization of the Omega Psi Phi Inc., will hold a Fatherhood Conversation to help dads caught in the system that he describes.

Topics discussed will include driver's license reinstatement, child support services, GED enrollment, job training, job search/placement, volunteer opportunities, as well as support order modification where applicable.

The event will be held 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Canaan Baptist Church, 2835 Branton Woods Drive. It is open to the public and refreshments will be served.

In addition to Saturday's activities, the DHS also is planning an event titled "Fatherhood: A Celebration" in Columbus next month. The event will be held April 14 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., at the Salvation Army Worship and Community Center, 5201 Warm Springs Road. It will include a job fair, free food and live entertainment. Everything is free and open to the public.

Marvin Broadwater Sr., state representative for the Georgia State Organization of the Omega Psi Phi, appeared before Columbus Council earlier this week, promoting the event and educating city officials about the issue. He said the fraternity has entered into a partnership with the Fatherhood Program to conduct conversations around the state, and the Columbus event will be the blueprint used for 40 other communities.

"I have observed a vicious cycle for many of our fathers in this great state as it relates to child support," Broadwater told councilors. "The cycle starts with a late or non-existent child support payment. Driver's licenses then are revoked. The father or parent is arrested, loses his job, is arrested again for a crime, and the cycle continues. Meanwhile, no father is in the child's life. This program gives that father a chance to break the cycle."

He said fatherhood is related to many of the challenging issues faced by local governments and policymakers, such as crime, homelessness, domestic violence, mass incarceration and poverty.

"If we dim the radiance of one issue, we consequently decrease the radiance of another simultaneously," he said. "Fathers who find themselves in child support arrears will benefit tremendously from this program. The plan is to blanket the city and inform all citizens of this program, the forum and its benefits, with the ultimate goal of ensuring the child has the father in his or her life."

Aaron Tarver, 39, knows the cycle all too well. He said he went to federal prison in 2002 for trafficking marijuana, and was unable to support his four children. When he got out of prison in 2006, the state hit him with \$17,654 bill for child support payments in arrears.

Tarver said he joined the Fatherhood Program and began making payments, but he lost his job, and ended up in trouble again.

"Child support suspended my license for not being able to pay child support," he said. "And like I try to tell them, 'How can I pay child support if I do not have a license to get back and forth?' So I started to catch the bus, doing what I had to do to get back and forth to work for almost a year, catching rides here and there."

“But with the money that I was making as a convicted felon, I wasn’t able to make the money to survive and pay child support,” he said. “So, of course, I started making payments on my child support, and just started getting behind and behind.”

He said his license was been suspended several times because of his circumstances, and each time the Fatherhood Program helped him get it reinstated. The outreach specialist for the program in Columbus is Ed Harbison Jr., who Tarver says helped him get back on track.

“And, thanks to God this time I’ve been able to work it out,” he said. “I work for my brother’s cleaning service and I have a stable job. So I have been able to keep my payments up now.”

In Georgia, a child support order is established taking into account the income of both parents and the number of children. If a parent does not obey a support order, he or she may be found in contempt of court.

“Non-custodial parents found in contempt of court may be fined, sentenced to jail or both,” according to information on the state DHS website. “The judge may order the non-custodial parent who is unable to pay to enroll in the Fatherhood Program.”

The child support order may also be enforced through:

- Withholding child support from paychecks or unemployment insurance payments or weekly worker's compensation benefits.
- Intercepting federal and/or state income tax refunds.
- Reporting delinquent parents to major credit bureaus.
- Suspending or revoking driver's, professional or occupational licenses for failure to pay child support.
- Reviewing and modifying child support orders periodically.
- Intercepting lottery winnings up to amounts allowed by Georgia Law.
- Filing liens to seize matched bank accounts, lump sum worker's compensation settlements and real or personal property.
- Denying, suspending or revoking passports issued by the State Department.
- Requiring the posting of bond to secure payment of overdue support.

Individuals with child support cases may request a review and modification of their child support order every three years, according to DHS. However, a review may be granted

sooner if the requesting party has a substantial change in circumstances, such as unemployment or diagnosis of a serious illness

Ravae Graham, a spokeswoman for the Georgia Department of Human Services, said the Georgia Fatherhood Program was started as an alternative to incarceration.

“Parents need help, and sometimes there are barriers to employment, and that can be under-employment or unemployment,” she said. “This is a mechanism to help them in their role so they will be able to be there, not just financially, but emotionally in the lives of their children.

“Anything that can help them to get a leg up with getting employment — whether it’s GED classes, technical college courses, extra job training — we’re willing to help, so that way they will be in a better position to meet their child support obligations.”

Graham said non-custodial parents whose licenses have been revoked due to non-payment can have their licenses reinstated as long as they remain in the program.

Harbison said there are usually anywhere from 30 to 220 local fathers enrolled in the program, and he just got 38 new participants this month.

“We don’t just want them to find employment, we want to make sure they have self-sustaining careers, instead of just a job,” he said. “... So finding careers and providing a pathway for those careers is one of the program’s charges.”

Smith has been a strong advocate for the program, he said. Two years ago, he helped organized a mini-camp for children in the area and invited fathers to participate.

“Orwin, once he was exposed, he said, ‘Hey, look we need to get out in the community and get the fathers to participate in the Fatherhood Program,’” Harbison said, “because it helped him so much.”

Through such efforts, Harbison hopes fathers will stop seeing Child Support as an agency that wants to suspend people’s driver’s licenses and make life hard for them.

“I’ve always believed that the government exists to serve the people and not itself,” he said. “I think we’re reaching the community in a way that they can understand that we’re designed to help you not hurt you.”

Georgia’s Child Support Services improves mobile app- On Common Ground News Georgia’s Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) has improved its free mobile app to help reduce waiting in line and make services more accessible to parents, officials announced.

The new features allow customers to upload documents, securely change direct deposit information and request closure of their cases. The app also provides information on

how to reinstate their driver's licenses and outreach programs for parents who are struggling to pay their court-ordered amounts.

"These new features essentially put an agent at our customers' fingertips, empowering them to manage their cases anytime, anywhere and not have to wait in line," said Georgia Department of Human Services Commissioner Robyn A. Crittenden.

Since its launch in 2016, the mobile application has allowed customers to make payments, review payment history, view scheduled appointments, and receive notifications and alerts on important information about their cases, officials said.

The GA DCSS Mobile App is available on Apple and Android devices and can be downloaded via the App Store or the Google Play Store.

In addition to managing cases on the mobile application, customers can visit childsupport.georgia.gov to manage their cases online or call 1-844-MYGADHS (1-844-694-2347) to speak to an agent.

DFACS worker charged with child cruelty against own daughter- WXIA

By Catherine Park

A mother and DFACS employee was taken into custody for spanking her own daughter until she had bruises on her legs.

On Thursday, March 8, an officer with the Henry County Police Department was called to an elementary school in reference to a child abuse case. When the officer arrived, he met with a teacher and a child who said her leg was hurting.

According to police, the teacher instructed the child to pull up her pant leg to show a large bruise on the top and inner portion of her thigh.

When asked what happened, the child allegedly told the teacher that she was spanked and then ran into a fan.

Police say the child told the officer that she had received a demerit from school the day before.

The girl allegedly told police that when her mother picked her up from school, she told her about the demerit and was told that she would get a spanking. Later, the girl's dad told police the demerit was given because she stole money from another child at her school.

According to the incident report, when the family returned home, the mom spanked the girl on her legs with a "carrot bat" (a plastic-type bat that looks like a carrot). After receiving her spanking, the girl allegedly told her mother that her leg was hurting, after which her mother rubbed ointment on the child's legs.

The officer asked her what her typical punishment was and she stated she either got spanked with the "carrot bat" or got a belt to her bottom, according to the incident report.

Croll was also interviewed by police and stated that she did in fact spank her daughter for the demerit she received and showed the officer exactly where she had done it. According to the incident report, she also stated that after the child received her spanking, she tripped on a cord connected to a fan on the floor and fell on top of it.

DFACS was notified of the incident and Croll was taken into custody on charges of cruelty to children in the first degree.

The Georgia Division of Family and Children Services released this statement to 11Alive.

"Merita Roberts-Croll was hired by the Department of Human Services on January 1, 1991, and her current position is Children and Family Services Review Statewide Assessment/Program Improvement Plan Project Director in the Division of Family and Children Services. Ms. Roberts-Croll was placed on suspension without pay on March 12, 2018 after her arrest, pending the outcome of the investigation. Her job responsibilities were in the state office and did not involve direct service delivery to children and families."

11Alive reached out to the family for this story but they declined comment.

Fraternity joins forces with Georgia Department of Human Services to help fathers- *The Ledger-Enquirer*
By Ben Wright

With nearly 50 percent of Columbus households led by a single parent, the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. has joined forces with the Georgia Department of Human Services to reach more fathers.

More than 45 Columbus residents joined state officials at Canaan Baptist Church on Saturday to talk about "Fatherhood: A Conversation on Child Support Services." The event included a panel discussion and an opportunity for fathers to get answers to questions about services.

Marvin Broadwater Sr., a Georgia state representative for Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., said he was talking to a member of the fraternity when fatherhood was mentioned as a need among area families. "One of our cardinal principals is manhood," he said. "Once I went to the first fatherhood program, I said it needs to go statewide."

Broadwater thought it was alarming to learn that 48.6 percent of Columbus households is run by a single parent. With help from the fraternity, he wants to reach out to small

communities in Waycross, Camilla, Dublin and others to make them aware of services provided by the state.

"The ultimate goal is to help the children," he said. "We need to touch the father in order for the father to touch the child. We want him to do his responsibilities, but we also want them to be part of the child's life."

Many fathers get caught in a vicious cycle. One may lose his license and shortly thereafter lose his job if employed. "If they go to jail, they go in front of the judge," he said. "They get out of jail and they can't get a job. What do they do?"

Kiska Dennis-Gear, a fatherhood supervisor in the Georgia Division of Child Support Services, said the state can help provide noncustodial parents who are unemployed with employment opportunities or resources which would make them more employable. Short-term programs range from 90 days to no more than six months.

The training may include welding classes, getting a commercial driver's license or attending technical school courses to assist in employment.

"What we look at in this partnership is an opportunity to open the floor for discussion and explain services," Dennis-Gear said. "It's a welcoming opportunity to do that."

After attending an orientation, a person would be provided with details of the programs and expectations. "He would have the option to decide if he would want to participate," she said.

A fatherhood celebration is set for 10 a.m. April 28, 2018 at the Salvation Army Worship and Community Center, 5201 Warm Springs. For information about the program, call 1-844-694-2347 (select options 1, 2 and 3) or go to the fatherhood link at dcss.dhs.ga.gov

Helping Hands: Community resources help mend a fractured Bartow family- *The Daily Tribune News*

By James Swift

Although he's barely old enough to be in high school, Joshua Ross knew he was on a road to ruin. The 14-year-old painted a bleak picture of what he thought his life would resemble had things gone a little differently when he was younger.

"I would just sit at home, not talking to anybody — I'd just be a potato on a couch," he said. "I wouldn't amount to anything, I'd just be an oxygen waster."

His stepfather, 46-year-old Stanley Ashe of Cartersville, thinks the outcomes would have been even worse.

"By the time he was 16 or 17, he'd be in jail. He'd probably be in and out of prison all his life because that's the attitude he had," Ashe said.

"Or he'd be dead."

Ashe, a carpenter foreman, has been Ross' stepfather since his stepson was 5. Even then, he suspected something wasn't quite right about the child's behavior.

"We had got him back from his dad and there had been some things that had went on there, so we got him into this counseling," Ashe said. "We got notes from the teacher or calls from the principal — he was constantly in trouble, every single day."

Educators kept telling Ashe the same thing. Ross displayed all the hallmarks of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which he was officially diagnosed with when he was 6.

"They put him on Adderall, and they had him on some other kinds of medication, then they put him on a time-release Adderall and a quick-release Adderall," Ashe recollected. "They had the child so medicated up, and it wasn't helping."

Ross said things started getting really bad when he was in the third grade.

"I was always getting into fights," he said. "I was always getting picked on, so I tried to fight back, but that never really did work out for me — I got out-of-school suspension and in-school-suspension many times when I was in elementary school up to, like, seventh grade."

Ross' arguments with his mother were getting especially heated. Ashe recalled his stepson and his wife reaching their boiling point.

"He hit his mom — he hit her a couple of times in the head," he said. "She pulled over by the side of the road and called the law because she couldn't do anything with him."

That led to Ross being charged with battery. Afterwards, Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) briefly took Ross and his siblings out of Ashe's home.

Ashe, who is also a Baptist preacher, said the agency's involvement truly was a godsend.

"My church was praying, I was praying, other people were praying," he said. "I believe God let this happen, because He knew exactly what He was doing. When we got involved with DFCS, He put the perfect people in our lives, people we needed."

It took some time for Ross' behavior to change. But by and by, Ashe said signs of improvement could be seen.

"Through DFCS, they helped us reach out to different programs," he said. "We took some parenting classes together with Advocates for Children and then they referred him

to the [Highland Rivers Health] ROC Clubhouse ... he also gets to see a mental health doctor from All God's Children Pediatrics."

Before becoming system-involved, such services were unobtainable for Ross.

"We tried to reach out to people, but nobody would help because he didn't have insurance," Ashe said. "He wasn't qualifying for Medicaid because of my income — we even tried to get him into Georgia HOPE, but [they] dropped him ... I even tried to pay cash to them, just for his visits and medications, but they wouldn't do it."

DFCS officials, however, were able to get Ross qualified for PeachCare. Shortly thereafter he started receiving mental health treatments and attending programs hosted by several local youth services organizations.

The attitude adjustment, however, wasn't immediate. Ross was still getting in trouble at school. At one point, he was suspended for making inappropriate remarks to a female student.

It was on the ride home that Ashe realized the programs were beginning to help him, as well.

"I told him what he told her was against the law — if he was an adult, he'd go to jail for stuff like that," he recounted. "That's when we started bonding a little bit better. I was going to the parenting classes and learning different ways to communicate with him."

At times, Ashe said he felt he was just as "in the wrong" as his stepson. "He couldn't bring home good grades, so he wasn't getting to do anything," he said. "It probably did look to him like we were favoring the other kids more."

Ross was referred to the ROC (Reaching Our Community) Clubhouse last May. There, he was taught life skills, coping skills, behavior management and how to better socialize with his peers.

"It's funded through the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities ... since it's a state-funded program, there's no cost for anybody to attend — they don't need insurance or anything like that," said Highland Rivers Health spokesman Michael Mullet. "The clubhouse, I think there are six or eight across the state, so we're fortunate to have one in our region."

Although it took his stepson some time to warm up to the program, Ashe said he slowly began to see Ross' behavior change for the better.

"He got to interact with other kids that had the same problems he went through," he said. "The more he started coming, the more they worked on him, until one day, it was like he turned on a light."

While Ross said he couldn't pinpoint when the "turning point" was, there's no denying that the youth services he received through DFCS have helped him become more sociable.

"They provided me with someone who would come out to the school or to my house just to talk about how things have been going, how to manage stuff and just to talk," he said. "I used to never talk [at school] or do anything because I was afraid I was going to get punched and I would get in trouble for it. But now I speak more freely and just say what's on my mind."

Ashe said his stepson's behavioral turnaround over the last half year — no doubt the end dividend of a confluence of community services and assistance programs — has been remarkable.

"I think before this change he didn't really care, and sometimes I'd think that he didn't really care if he was alive or not," he said. "Kids made fun of him and he didn't really have any friends and I believe that helped push his attitude as far as it did. But now, he's outgoing and he has a good outlook on life — it's a completely different child."

Ross' grades have improved and it's been a while since he's faced any disciplinary action at school. This summer he plans on getting a job so he can save up for a car.

But that's not the only long-term planning he's doing these days.

"I have started thinking about the future," he said. "I would love to go to college."

Ashe teared up when reflecting on just how much progress his stepson has made over the last few months.

"We've got this little handshake that we do everyday ... I say 'what does that mean?' and he says 'I give you my word' and I say 'well, I give you mine,'" he said. "We get along great, we've got a great relationship — he trusts me and I trust him."

Fraternity leads local push to help fathers provide for their children- WTVM

By Jose Zozaya

Video: <http://www.wtvm.com/clip/14205879/video-fraternity-leads-local-push-to-help-fathers-provide-for-their-children>

Today was the first of many conversations leaders with Omega Psi Phi fraternity hope to share with fathers across town.

Dozens of men shared information and insight on the kind of help Georgia's Department of Human Services can provide through its Fatherhood Program, which has been part of DHS' outreach for 12 years.

Part of this effort, for Marvin Broadwater, Sr., the fraternity's Georgia representative, is to counter any rumors or fears the men may have against an agency that handles and monitors child support payments.

"It's in their minds," Broadwater said, "that it exists because 20 years ago, the Department of Human Services was different."

John Hurst, DHS's deputy director for child support services, said the agency has followed a federal lead to change the way they operate and bring non-custodial fathers into the conversation.

"Over the last several years, the [federal agencies have] been moving away from enforcement and more to services. Georgia again is out in front of that," Hurst said.

The services offered through the Fatherhood program include possible child support modifications, depending on the father's financial situation. That client will have a case manager to help them with financial issues, as well as help them find job training and placement.

"I'm actually gaining two things at one time," said Rico Morrison, who attended Saturday's "Fatherhood Conversation" at Canaan Baptist Church. "Independence, [and] getting to see my child again; that's the main focus I have."

In addition, the Fatherhood program can help men, like Morrison, with suspended driving licenses reinstate them, and ensure clients can get to the jobs they want.

This, Hurst said, is a partnership both the agency and the fraternity want to grow; to bring non-custodial fathers into the discussion of helping themselves and their children succeed.

"We really appreciate [Omega Psi Phi's] effort in bringing the audience to us and reaching out to them, and helping us get our message out there so we can help people."